

Star on rise for airline of rich and famous

London Air Services marks 10th year with a new jet and a new home in Richmond

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At a time when Air Canada is struggling to stay afloat, Richmond-based London Air Services (LAS) is continues to soar.

The airline, which caters to the rich and famous, has a new home and a new state-of-the-art aircraft in its fleet.

All this as LAS celebrates its 10th anniversary.

For the large aviation community here in Richmond, the News gives you a sneak peak into the airline of the powerful.

As you enter the technologically advanced London Aviation Centre at YVR's South Terminal, you feel dwarfed by the sheer size of the place.

To put it in perspective, its hangar doors are high enough to clear a Boeing 737. For those who don't know how big these wonders of flight are, it is the height equivalent of an average four-storey office building.

"Its 366-foot clear span makes it one of the largest clear-span buildings in the province" said Wynne Powell, LAS CEO and president.

But what impresses Powell most about this high-tech, 84,000 square foot wonder is that it's equipped with foam containers, which, in case of a fire, will detonate and fill the hangar full of foam in four minutes -- avoiding engulfing the building with smoke or fire.

"Isn't that awesome?" he asked, as he gave a tour of the hangar to a group of journalists last week. "The computers are so sophisticated that they can sense whether it's a hot engine or open flames.

"This is the first new hangar on the south side of the airport that was built with the future in mind."

The hangar, which can accommodate up to 10 aircrafts, features a fire-resistant partition door with three separate moving parts.

"It divides the building in half, which is needed when we need to bring the temperature down on our aircrafts," says Powell.

What he means is that cold air can't encroach from one side to another.

"We can have on side completely closed to allow for acclimatization of aircrafts preparing for departure, while the open side can facilitate regular aircraft maintenance," says Powell.

The building also houses a pilot training facility, a maintenance garage, the offices for LAS and Sonora Resort (which its parent company, Richmond-based H.Y. Louie Group also owns as well as IGA and London Drugs).

"We bring in world experts to train our pilots," says Powell. "We also have six mechanics on staff and half a million dollars in parts for our helicopters."

The centre is also environmentally friendly, with a number of "green initiatives used in the construction.

"The builders used 60 per cent recycled steel and recycled concrete," he added.

"An energy-efficient Cool Roof System was installed to maintain consistent heat throughout the hangar."

The opening of the aviation centre comes at the same time London Air Services (LAS) celebrates its 10th anniversary.

When the private business-class airline began offering its deluxe flights, it owned a single Bombardier Lear Jet.

"By year three, we had three aircrafts," added Powell. "We cater mostly to the time-pressed corporate clients ... when we started, many in the business didn't think we would survive. Well, here we are a decade later and growing."

Today, the fleet consists of 10 -- five Bombardier Lear 45 XRS jets, a Bombardier Challenger 604, two Bombardier Challenger 605 and two Augusta AW 139 helicopters.

"We are also in the business of buying and selling aircraft ... in fact, we use ours for five to seven years and then we sell them," said Powell, who added there are 25 pilots on its roster.

For chief pilot Gary Farn the newest addition to its fleet of airplanes is what excites him most.

"We recently acquired the new Bombardier Challenger 605," said Farn, as he gave a guided tour of the lavish, fully equipped office in the sky.

As he pointed to its many features -- leather swivel seats and mini ottomans, a couch that converts into a bed, a microwave, DVD entertainment centre, flat screen television, Digital Airborne telephone system, fax/data services, modem link-up -- he added meals are fully catered by IGA.

"It's hassle-free flying for busy business executives," added Powell. "Many executive conduct business meetings and conference calls while they are in the air.

"We offer 24-hour service, seven days a week and we can be in the air in as little as an hour."

Premium, first class service doesn't come cheap.

"Yes, it's not cheap but it's cost-effective time management," said Powell.

Although he wouldn't discuss costs, Powell did say it's definitely more expensive than say a first-class ticket with Air Canada.

Hollywood actors like Al Pacino are willing to pay the price because "of the privacy and convenience we offer."

"Movie stars like Pacino, who film here, come to us tired and they appreciate the privacy," said Powell.

Prior to boarding, London Air pre-screens passports electronically so passengers don't have, to and will arrange taxis for their arrival so they can be whisked away from the airport stress-free.

Meanwhile, when it comes to flying this modern, powerful aircraft, Farn said it's a real treat.

"It can travel nonstop anywhere in North America, or to Tokyo with only one quick stop," said Farn, who has been flying eight years with LAS.

"We can fly anywhere around the world ... I have taken clients to Australia, Istanbul and Hong Kong for example."

As for servicing visitors for the 2010 Olympic Games and beyond, LAS has purchased two more aircraft and is working on a contract with VANOC. For more information, visit www.londonair.ca.



CREDIT: John Spooner Photo

London Air Service's CEO and president Wynne Powell, right, and chief pilot Gary Farn take to the controls of LAS's latest addition, a Bombardier Challenger 605, parked at the new London Aviation Centre.